

Elizabeth Jo Ann Sumner
Reflections for Women's History Month

What Is In a Name ?

What is in a name ? Every person has one . For women , the issue differs from that for men . Marriage usually results in a woman's changing her last name to adopt her husband's surname. Some women choose to hyphenate her last name with his last name . The results may be satisfactory , even if lengthy . What to name the children becomes an interesting decision , especially when the hyphenated-name may be longer than the newborn child .

What is in a name ? In 1997 this became an important issue for me . My name is who I am . Both times I married , I followed societal tradition and dropped my last name in order to use my husband's surname . I was MRS. (HUSBAND). I undertook, both times, the lengthy and tedious task of changing records and notifying the proper authorities of my name change . Neither husband had to do any of this . In 1997 I once again became known by that unique name : PLAINTIFF. Both of my marriages ended after many years devoted to each one. Divorce was the last option . I became MRS. PLAINTIFF.

What is in a name ? During the intense , bitter and lengthy litigation involved in ending my second marriage , I realized I was MRS. HIM in name only . I wanted to be who I am , not who I was " once upon a time." My attorney had advised me I could resume use of my birth name (the name on my birth certificate) any time I wished. Indeed, my female attorney was one of the pioneers who did not take her husband's surname when she married some years ago. She explained to me the simple process of dropping my married name and resuming my birth name. The Social Security Office could handle it easily.

What is in a name ? A true adventure awaits one who tries to change it . When my moment of epiphany occurred and I knew I wanted to take back my birth name before the dragged out divorce was final , I took my attorney's advice . When I went to the Social Security Office, the clerk told me I could not change my name without a Court Order. Battle number one began . I called my attorney and found she was out of the country . Her male assistant , who handles many of the divorce cases with her , talked with me . He informed me my female attorney had over-simplified the situation. He emphasized a court order would be necessary to change my name . Battle number two began . He also advised me not to change my name before the divorce due to various reasons with which I did not agree. He said he knew best . Battle number three began.

What is in a name ? I found out in the Lexington County Family Court . After the male attorney told me I did indeed need a court order to change my name , I marched off to the Lexington County Court House . I completed the application and paid the fifty dollars to file for a name change . On the application , I was asked why I wanted to do this . My honest answer was simple : after much thought and consideration in talking with my attorney , I wished to resume

my birth name. Much to my surprise , the male judge who reviewed my request proceeded to deny it ! His justification was simple : my reason was not justifiable . My wanting to resume my birthname was not justified . Battle number four began . I called the male attorney and told him what had happened . He added this information to my file , which would be reviewed by my female attorney when she returned from her business trip . He also attempted an " I told you so " lecture, but I chose not to listen to him again. Battle number five was underway in the law office.

What is in a name ? My female attorney ,whom I had retained ,reviewed my file concerning the name change quest when she returned from her trip. She called me, told me again what to do in order to change my name , and to go do it if I still wanted . By now I was on a mission . Against the advice of the male attorney , and defying the Lexington County Family Court male judge , I marched into the Social Security Office and took on another clerk . I stood my ground , literally , and argued down the issue of applying for my name change. Armed with every document from my birth certificate to my passport , I completed the application . Within one month , I had a new Social Security card with my birth name !

What is in a name ? The male point of view is very different . A male attorney who had drawn my will many years ago said I needed to wait until my divorce was granted to change my name on my will . I was told I **WOULD** need a court order showing my name change to change my name on my will . Since the will would be effective regardless , I agreed to wait , and thus avoided battle number six . As we were preparing for the actual divorce hearing, the male attorney with the law firm handling my divorce advised me to have in the Complaint the request to resume my "maiden name." Since I had been using that name in a most legal way for months, I did humour him and agree. I avoided battle number seven . The morning the male judge in Richland County granted me my divorce , he also granted me full legal use of my "maiden name". Since I had been legally using that name for months , I appreciated his blessings.

What is in a name ? For this woman, my name became more than my identity . It became my crusade to establish my identity as Ms. Sumner , as ME . In going through the process , I learned that even though I have the right to change my name, the male attitudes toward this are archaic, based upon my experience this year . Yes , we women have come a long way , but the struggles are ongoing . We have come a long way , but even all of our rights and privileges cannot be taken for granted . We often must not only force an issue , we must still fight to enforce it .

What is in a name ? For Elizabeth Jo Ann Sumner , the name is who I am . The name also represents my personal struggle and triumph against the " system " . My name represents to me not only who I am but also one woman's small victory in the male-dominated system and the ongoing crusade to have and keep women's rights we not only have earned, but also deserved before any battle ever began .